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Economic Imperialism in Education Research: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

In this review, we explore ***economic imperialism***, a concept that captures the phenomenon of a single discipline's power over so many facets of social life and policy—including education. Through a systematic search, we examine how economic imperialism has been conceptualized and applied across fields. We uncovered three key, interconnected elements of economic imperialism that hold relevance for education research. First, economics has colonized other disciplines, narrowing the lens through which policymakers have designed education reforms. Second, an overreliance on economic rationales for human behavior neglects other explanations. Third, a focus on economic outcomes of education has subjugated other important aims of education. We share implications for researchers to use economic theory in ways that are interdisciplinary but not imperialist.

Keywords

economic imperialism; education policy; educational policy; educational reform; market-based reforms; neoliberalism; policy; textual analysis

In a March 2020 *Foreign Affairs* essay, Paul Romer—former chief economist of the World Bank and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics—asked: *Do economists have too much power*? After posing this ostensibly rhetorical question, he arrived at the following blunt conclusion:

> No economist has a privileged insight into questions of right and wrong, and none deserves a special say in fundamental decisions about how society should operate. Economists who argue otherwise and exert undue influence in public debates about right and wrong should be exposed for what they are: frauds.

Romer's critique built on a growing skepticism and distrust of the power that a single field of study—economics—holds over social policy and public affairs (Blank, 2002; Fine & Milonakis, 2009). Yet few economists have self-reflected on their own outsized influence—in fact, just the opposite. For instance, Gary Becker (1976) argued that economics can

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help us understand nearly every aspect of human life, including "the uses of time, crime, marriage, social interactions," and so on (p. 8). And indeed, economic analyses drive public policy decision making on a vast range of issues, from the environment, to child care, to immigration, to food provision (Marglin, 2008); economic logic has even infiltrated parenting philosophy (Oster, 2019) and marriage advice (Szuchman & Anderson, 2012).

Economic ideas have permeated nearly every facet of education policy, too. Policymakers across political parties agree that a primary purpose of education is to address economic problems by preparing a workforce and stimulating economic development (Easton & Klees, 1990; Grubb & Lazerson, 2007), and policies such as merit pay, school choice, and standardized assessment are often rooted in economic ideas about how people make decisions and how markets operate. The role of schooling in the economy has "heavily influenced, if not dominated" discussions about education policy and practice (Easton & Klees, 1990, p. 413; Reay, 2012).

In this review, we explore a concept that captures this phenomenon of a single discipline's power over so many facets of social life and policy—including education: *economic imperialism*. We argue that *economic imperialism* offers a rich and unambiguous—yet underused—framework for analysis that uncovers the roots of many educational reforms. Through a systematic literature review that yielded 62 published academic works from 1961 through 2020, covering all disciplinary areas, we examine how economic imperialism has been conceptualized and applied across fields, including education. We identify promising directions for applying the concept of economic imperialism more widely in education research.

Economic Imperialism in Context

Economic imperialism was defined by economist Lazear (2000) as

> the extension of economics to topics that go beyond the classical scope of issues, which include consumer choice, theory of the firm, (explicit) markets, macroeconomic activity … to explain all social behavior by using the tools of economics … (p. 103)

Lazear's positive and triumphant portrayal, along with some of his contemporaries (Buckley & Casson, 1993), advocated for increased economic imperialism on the grounds that economics was the "premier social science," and, in fact, was a "genuine science," unlike other social science fields (Lazear, 2000, p. 99), positing that economists' methods and theories were superior to all other approaches.

These economists advocated for a particular type of economics—orthodox economics, which is currently represented by neoclassical economics—to drive social science research and social policy (Dequech, 2007). Neoclassical economics is the dominant approach taught in most universities, which emphasizes individual rationality and utility maximization (Dequech, 2007), and economic imperialists argue that "the idea of 'rational economic man' is appropriate to social science as a whole" (Hodgson, 1994, p. 21). A widespread critique of orthodox economics is an apparent disregard of issues relating to community,

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equity, and social justice (Fine & Milonakis, 2009). Such analyses often ignore political constraints, organizational structures, and "often focus too much on efficiency issues and too little on distributional issues" (Blank, 2002, p. 821)—that is, equity in outcomes and "who gets what." In contrast, the wide-ranging and contested field of heterodox economics, an umbrella term that incorporates everything from feminist to Marxian to institutional economics, has countered many of the assumptions and frameworks of orthodox or neoclassical economics (Lawson, 2006), and provided alternative theories (Lee, 2012); yet these approaches have often been marginalized within economics.

Sociologists have explored this trend as well, studying economists as a cultural group, and have noted their influence on policy. Fourcade (2009) described how economists' identities and influences have been shaped by their country's contexts. For example, in the United States, economic knowledge and expertise has been more market oriented than in other countries because competitive markets have been privileged, and this has fostered "'intellectual imperialism' whereby any social object becomes available for an economic analysis" (Fourcade, 2009, p. 9). Economists, in this context, have held a unique position among social scientists, and their social superiority has made them entitled and imperialistic (Fourcarde et al., 2015). Sociologists have used the term *economization*, to capture this broader "shift toward thinking in terms of the economy" (Berman, 2014, p. 399) in the United States.

Education researchers have used concepts related to economic imperialism, such as *neoliberal, market-based reform, quasimarket, corporate*, or *incentivist* (e.g., Apple, 2000; Lipman, 2004; Lubienski et al., 2011; Moeller, 2018) to critique education policies that prioritize individual over collective action and efficiency and cost-effectiveness over equity, and that ignore such issues as race, class, and gender in education. Although neoliberalism and orthodox economics are often conflated in critiques in the educational literature, these are indeed two distinct concepts, one being a political philosophy and ideology (Mirowski, 2014), and the other a tradition or paradigm in social science research, yet they have both been drawn on strategically to advance economic imperialism in policy and research.

Political economists of education have argued that a hyperfocus on the economic purposes of schooling, emphasizing skills required for the stratified workforce, educates students in ways that reproduce social inequities (Klees, 2017). Such scholars stress that "education does not exist in isolation from broader social issues and processes, which affect policy interventions and shape content and outcomes" (Novelli et al., 2014, p. 2). In the area of comparative and international education, scholars have noted that global education policies have overwhelmingly prioritized economic development through market mechanisms, subjugating issues of equity and rights (Klees et al., 2019; Robertson, 2009).

To contribute to the above literature, we propose *economic imperialism* as a framework that focuses on the roots of market-driven or neoliberal policies by examining the roles economists and economic ideas play in laying the foundation for and promoting neoliberal reforms in education. Whereas neoliberalism captures ideological leanings that might pervade several fields, economic imperialism helps explain how these ideas came to the forefront and gained traction and widespread appeal. We further argue for the

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adoption of economic imperialism to identify how the discipline has colonized other academic and policy areas, and explain how, in turn, it channels new normative aims. For instance, economic imperialism has led to certain purposes of education—the contribution of schooling to the economy, that is, preparing the workforce, and give individual households chances to achieve economic mobility—being prioritized by policymakers over the democratic aims of schools, such as preparing citizens or providing equal opportunity (Labaree, 1997). Economic imperialism further influences the ways in which policy actors and researchers have approached other disciplines methodologically, including the application of orthodox economic assumptions, concepts, and exclusively quantitative and causal analyses, sidelining qualitative methods, such as ethnography and narrative research, and descriptive quantitative approaches.

Search Strategy and Analysis

In spring 2019, we searched titles and abstracts in electronic databases (including EBSCOHost, EconLit, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, and Google Scholar) for the following search terms: *economic imperialism, economic hegemony*, and *economic dominance*. We found 734 articles. We excluded articles that were not about the dominance of the economics discipline.[1] We then pulled 134 full texts for relevant articles,[2] and identified 60 relevant pieces, only six of which were published in the field of education. To broaden our search, we then analyzed the reference lists of these six articles and identified two more articles in the field of education, which brought our total sample size to 62 publications.

We analyzed articles to identify (a) how economic imperialism was defined, if at all; (b) how it was studied (empirically or theoretically/conceptually); and (c) if it was empirical, the methodology/method, data sources, and location. For education articles, we also captured the policy or arena of focus (e.g., choice, teacher policy, standards/accountability).

Conceptualizations of Economic Imperialism

Economists dominate the discussion of economic imperialism, as half of the sources we found were written by economists and published in economics journals (see Table 1). Some were published interdisciplinary or heterodox journals (e.g., *Journal of Political Economy, History of Economic Ideas*), and presented critical or historical analyses of economic imperialism (e.g., Davis, 2016; Falgueras-Sorauren, 2018; Fine, 2002). Several articles published in mainstream economics journals were highly supportive of exporting economic ideas to other fields. These authors either advocate explicitly for widespread application of economic theory and methods to other social science (e.g., Buckley & Casson, 1993; Lazear, 2000), or demonstrate the effectiveness of economic approaches in other fields (e.g., Sigelman & Goldfarb, 2012).

[1]For example, we excluded articles where “economic imperialism” mentioned in the title or abstract referred to the imperial nature of national economies or to the phenomena of colonialism or neocolonialism. For instance, an article examining British economic imperialism over colonized countries, rather than the imperialism of the economics discipline or theory, would be excluded.

[2]We had to exclude 33 texts that we could not access or were not translated into English. We also did not include texts if they had only a mention of *economic imperialism* but did not either interrogate the concept or apply it to a subject area.

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Beyond economics, a wide range of scholars have explored economic imperialism, in fields such as sociology (Swedberg, 1987); public policy, including environmental policy (Ayres, 1991); migration studies (Abreu, 2012); anthropology (Chuah, 2006); law (Kessaris, 2011); political science (Sigelman & Goldfarb, 2012); health and medicine (Klonschinski, 2014; Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2002; Silverman, 1995), including organ-transplant decisions (Satyapal, 2005); and religious studies, such as using economic frameworks to explain the growth or decline of religion (Martin, 2006). In contrast to the mainstream economics literature, which is often advocacy oriented, these studies are more likely to examine the trend of economic imperialism historically or empirically, and assess its implications—its strengths and weaknesses—for a given area of study. Several of these studies critique economic imperialism but are supportive of multi- or interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., socioeconomics) that combine economics and other social sciences (e.g., Swedberg, 1987). Furthermore, they analyze the multiple ways in which economic imperialism occurs (e.g., Manic, 2016), viewing it as a phenomenon or analytic category to be studied using the tools of social science (Brubaker, 2013).[3]

This multidisciplinary literature focuses on several dimensions of economic imperialism: (a) how economic theories have been applied to these domains; (b) how econometrics or the methods that economists use have been applied to other fields; and, in a few cases, (c) how economists themselves have influenced policy through their networks. We discuss each of these below.

Imperialism Through Economic Theory

Most of the literature on economic imperialism describes how economic concepts or theories have invaded noneconomic fields, using the term *colonization* to describe how economics has infiltrated other social sciences (Abreu, 2012).

We found rational choice theory—the idea that people make self-interested and calculated decisions—to be one of the most discussed examples of economic imperialism. Rational choice theory has been generalized into “non-market domains,” such as religion and family (Zafirovski, 2000, p. 448). This suggests that rational choice governs not only economic decisions but also decisions shaping society in general, far beyond classical economists’ intentions for the use of the concept (Smelser, 1992).

Economic imperialism also colonizes other ideas from the social sciences. For example, the concept of *culture*, which was the domain of anthropologists, has been adopted by economists (Chuah, 2006). Economists studying culture privilege Western values for driving economic growth, viewing culture as a variable and explaining economic behavior using religion, language, or measures of trust.

Even in purportedly interdisciplinary approaches, economics tenets overpower the analyses and interpretations. For example, in migration studies, Abreu (2012) argued that the “new economics of labor migration” was described as a third way, between neoclassical and historical-structural approaches to migration, but that neoclassical economics really

[3]Thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for this insight.

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drives the approach (p. 60). Chafim (2016) argued that there is "no critical dialogue or recombination with previously established theories" from other social sciences and that "hybridization in this case is limited" (p. 161). Thus, economic imperialism is not about merging fields or interdisciplinarity but about imposing economic views on other fields.

Indeed, economic imperialism even marginalizes ideas within economics, particularly heterodox concepts and traditions, such as post-Keynesian approaches, feminist economics, Marxian economics, or radical political economy, and critics have cited "a sort of internal colonization within economics" (Fine, 2000, as cited in Manic, 2016, p. 154). In our review of the literature, we found that scholars primarily critiqued the neoclassical economic perspective, while alternative and less prominent schools of economic thought remained sidelined.

Economic Methodological Imperialism

Advocates for economic imperialism also argue that economics is a *method of analysis*, not just a field of study, and any social and political dimensions can be incorporated into economic models as "interdependent preferences" (Buckley & Casson, 1993, p. 1035; Lazear, 2000). Indeed, economic methodology is part of why economics has been able to contribute to multiple fields. For example, economists made inroads into law because, in part, they have "discovered … the absence of quantitative reasoning in law, and are moving quickly to fill it" (Cooter, 1981, p. 1261). In addition to its use of econometric analyses, the field of "law and economics" is dominated by neoclassical economic theory. Some scholars have argued that economic imperialism is less about theory and more about methodological stance: "broad ways of proceeding rather than specific narrow concepts" (Sigelman & Goldfarb, 2012, p. 2). However, as critics note, economics does not have to be quantitative; it is just that these are the methods that have become dominant and spread to other fields (Klaes, 2012, p. 17).

Some scholars have argued that economics is imperialistic in multiple ways. Manic (2016) pointed out that economics has imperialism of scope (the range of phenomena explained), imperialism of style (the techniques and the standards of inquiry used), and imperialism of standing—the prestige and power of the discipline itself (p. 153). For example, economics has influenced the World Bank indicators for "investment climate" through the "marketisation, mathematization, and quantification" (Kessaris, 2011, p. 403) that are inherent in the theory and empirical methods of economics. Indeed, sociologists have documented how economists rarely influence policy through their direct advice, but rather through the prevalence of such "economic styles of reasoning" (Hirschman & Berman, 2014, p. 781).

Empirical Evidence for Economic Imperialism

Although the vast majority of articles we found focused on philosophical or conceptual arguments about economic imperialism, a few used empirical methods to study the concept. Two historical pieces traced the development of disciples or the history of thought, specifically how Chicago school economists sought explicitly to colonize other fields and shape public policy (Nik-Khah & Van Horn, 2012), and how economic sociologists

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sought to explain core economic phenomena, rather than leave economic theory "to the economists alone" (Steiner, 1995, p. 186). Others were tangentially related to economics imperialism. One researcher surveyed students majoring in economics in Portugal and found that economics students were generally more "rightwing" leaning (Graça et al., 2016), building on a larger body of work that tries to assess whether the study of economics molds students' values and attitudes toward more antisocial behavior, or if students self-select into the field (Bauman & Rose, 2011; Etzioni, 2015). Some of these studies find both selection and "indoctrination" effects (Bauman & Rose, 2011; Etzioni, 2015) In one case study, political scientists analyzed how economics invaded the study of voting behavior and voter turnout by its importation of rational choice modeling techniques (Sigelman & Goldfarb, 2012). One study analyzed popular books about economics and assessed whether they were imperialistic (Vromen, 2009). The author argues that while these books convey economics as a superior discipline, they are not imperialistic, as the authors of these books do not seek to influence other sciences, but rather improve the image of their own "dismal science" (Vromen, 2009). Despite much discussion about economic imperialism, little empirical work has thus far been conducted to test the extent or reach of economic imperialism.

Economic Imperialism in Education

We found very few publications in education that directly engaged with the concept of economic imperialism. This small literature reflects a nascent and very recent uptake of the concept with only eight education-related academic publications, all written since 2012, in such subfields as early childhood (Stuart, 2016) K-2 (Ellison, 2014; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Gilead, 2015; Menashy & Read, 2016), and higher and vocational education (Allais, 2012, 2014; see Table 2). Geographically, studies have examined a variety of education contexts, including the United States (Ellison, 2014; Ellison & Aloe, 2019), New Zealand (Stuart, 2016), and cross-national studies (Allais, 2012, 2014; Menashy & Read, 2016).

The education scholarship includes both theoretical and empirical studies of economic imperialism. Theoretical writing focuses on such areas as the application of human capital theory to education (Tan, 2014) and on philosophical contributions to understanding education and economics (Gilead, 2015). Empirical work includes local and comparative case studies (Allais, 2014), qualitative research synthesis (Ellison & Aloe, 2019), document analysis (Stuart, 2016), and bibliometric analysis of texts (Menashy & Read, 2016).

Scholars have applied economic imperialism to a range of education topics, such as school choice, including charter schools, vouchers, and other public–private partnerships. Through a synthesis of qualitative studies conducted in five U.S. urban centers, Ellison and Aloe (2019) examined how neoclassical economic ideas and an "economic logic" of incentives drive schoolchoice policies that promote competitive markets in schooling. Choice policy, they argue, has "repositioned" parents as consumers (p. 1137), a reframing that has become widespread in choice rhetoric and reflects the dominance of rational choice theory. In a conceptual piece, Ellison (2014) explored how economic theory has dominated education policy prescriptions in the United States and has justified the expansion of accountability systems and "quasi-market forces" in education (p. 9). In their empirical analysis, Menashy and Read (2016) test the concept of economic imperialism by examining

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the role of economics in World Bank policies through a bibliometric analysis of institutional publications on public–private partnerships in schools. This research primarily examines the roles of economists themselves by tracing the terminal degrees of publications' authors, finding that a vast majority of proponents of public—private partnerships were trained as economists and that in turn international policies on education provision have been "disciplinarily skewed" toward economics (Menashy & Read, 2016, p. 17).

Scholars have also focused on human capital theory and how it shapes education policies that aim to increase productivity and economic growth. Much of this work has explored the presence of economic ideas in education. In a review, Tan (2014) explored the connection between economic imperialism and the uptake of human capital theory in education scholarship. Tan thematically synthesized several published works that critiqued the theory and its influence, including methodological, empirical, practical, and moral criticisms, concluding that human capital theory "has been criticized on the grounds of economic imperialism since it has penetrated into the territory of other disciplines and attempted to lead them" (p. 429). Through a document analysis of policy texts and curriculum, Stuart (2016) examined how ideas about human capital development, which came from economics, made their way into early childhood education policies in New Zealand. As shown through these studies, a particular and widely accepted economic idea—human capital theory—pervades education policy discourse.

Similarly, scholars have traced the influence of economic thinking on educational goals and have critiqued the dominant focus on the economically oriented aims of education. Allais's (2012, 2014) research adopts the concept of economic imperialism to study vocational education and the focus on outcomes-based qualifications. She examines the prevalence of neoclassical frameworks and their appeal, suggesting that "an increasing pre-occupation with education meeting the needs of the economy, together with the prevalence of economic concepts outside of economics, have contributed to the development of education policies which mimic economic ideas" (2014, p. 252).

Education scholars have also examined how economic imperialism influences teacher autonomy and accountability. Ellison (2014) critiqued an educational marketplace that embraced "value-added modeling of teacher effectiveness" (p. 9), such as publicly announced teacher ratings. Such "incentivist structures" draw on economic ideas around the value of competition, individualism, and measures of productivity. Furthermore, value-added models for teachers are an example of economization, whereby this economic policy device determines teacher quality in place of professionals within the field of education (Griffen & Panofsky, 2021). Stuart's (2016) work also argued that economic imperialism, with its focus on economic goals of schooling, affects teachers through a reduction in their autonomy, spurring tensions between economics-driven aims of education and school readiness and antiracist, social-justice-based curriculum and pedagogical practices, even in early childhood.

Despite these robust contributions to the education literature, we view this body of scholarship as minimal. Much more could be said about the imperial nature of economics in the areas of education detailed above. For instance, in the vast scholarship on school

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choice, many researchers have argued that economic theory drives choice policies, often using terms rooted in economics, such as *market mechanisms* and *competitive markets*; and, by applying neoliberal critiques, they reference neoclassical economic influence over choice policies, like Milton Friedman in making the case for school vouchers (Apple, 2000; Au & Ferrare, 2014). A focus on human capital–driven education policies has been critiqued by education scholars in various contexts, including both within the United States and globally (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Marginson, 2019). Education scholars have discussed the dominance of economic paradigms that guide education policy decision making (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). However, few have applied the concept of *imperialism* to frame their arguments. Although scholars widely critique economic ideas, research often stops short of exploring how and why such economic ideas came to pervade the field of education.

Discussion

The Critical Power of Economic Imperialism for Educational Scholarship

Our analysis of literature across all disciplines uncovered three key, interconnected elements of economic imperialism that hold relevance for education, including in such subfields as policy, leadership, curriculum, philosophy, comparative and international education, and others.

First, economics has colonized other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and international development studies (Chuah, 2006; Fine & Milonakis, 2009; Menashy & Read, 2016), narrowing the lens through which policymakers have designed education reforms, influencing the normative aims of education, and limiting the types of research methods that inform policies. Arguably, as a result, policies rooted in market logic, such as school choice, have become commonplace despite critiques of their impacts on equity, access, and quality (e.g., Frankenberg et al., 2011; Jennings, 2010; Lenhoff, 2020; Phillips et al., 2015; Stein, 2015). Although other factors, apart from economic imperialism, may contribute to market-based policies in education—for instance the power of corporate entities, philanthropists, and policy entrepreneurs (Reckhow, 2012; Scott, 2009; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Verger, 2012)—the clear reference to economic rationales and models within school choice policies warrants an analysis through the lens of economic imperialism.

Our analysis uncovered the many ways in which scholars have argued that economic ideas have not merely contributed to other fields, but overpowered them through claims to rigor and scientific methods. Although we identify only limited empirical studies to support this claim, we propose that our analysis should spur further studies that might reveal evidence for economics' imperial nature. By understanding and troubling this colonization, policymakers can rethink their disciplinary lenses and approach decision making through alternate frameworks and models.

Second, an overreliance on economic rationales for human behavior neglects other explanations. These include those that might be found through sociological, psychological, or anthropological ideas (Abreu, 2012; Chafim, 2016; Smelser, 1992; Tan, 2014). For instance, as noted earlier, human capital and rational choice theory dominates education research (Stuart, 2016; Tan, 2014), yet teacher performance and parent decision making

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might not be adequately explained through notions of self-interest or "choice." By acknowledging the narrow lens offered by economic models, researchers can seek out wider explanations to inform policy and practice.

Third, a focus on economic outcomes of education have subjugated and sometimes neglected other significant aims of education. For instance, human capital development and contributions to the economy have dominated educational policy goals, displacing such aims as equity, community, social cohesion, democracy, and social justice (Blank, 2002; Ellison, 2014; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Fine & Milonakis, 2009; Gilead, 2015). The literature on economic imperialism, overall, grapples with weighty questions about inequities perpetuated through the dominance of economics, in many areas including education. The hegemony of economics has suppressed alternative ways of conceptualizing educational finance, provision, assessment, and agenda-setting, and ignored "'non-economic' or social factors, as if market relations could prevail independently of broader social contexts" (Allais, 2014, p. 262). Economic imperialism offers a conceptual framing that attends to significant issues of injustice perpetuated by policies grounded solely in economics, such as how economic imperialism privileges Western culture (Chuah, 2006), and ignores conceptions of fairness (Klonschinski, 2014) and issues of community and equity (Fine & Milonakis, 2009; Marglin, 2008; Morson & Schapiro, 2017), while serving to educate students in ways that are "most often reproductive of class, race, gender, and other marginalising differences" (Klees, 2017, p. 416). Researchers can use economic imperialism to critique existing policies that exacerbate inequities and advance more just education policies, rather than offering solutions that are embedded within the framework of economics.

Implications for Education Theory

When adopting economic imperialism as a framework, scholars might offer stronger critiques by interrogating the disciplinary roots of educational ideas. We suggest economic imperialism as a clear organizing framework that can attend to the roles that economic concepts and economists play in promoting what education researchers have often described as neoliberal or market-based policies. Economic imperialism might build on existing literature by uncovering a key dimension of how particular education prescriptions emerge and persist by grappling with the explicit roles of economics and economists in producing and promoting market-based policies. In this way, economic imperialism moves beyond critique to uncover some of the understudied roots of policies; namely, economists and economic ideas. Economic imperialism captures a key dimension of how education policies become embraced, are enacted, implemented, and persist. We believe this dimension is missing in much of the critical education literature.

Implications for Empirical Education Research

Most of the research on economic imperialism has been theoretical, but we argue for more empirical testing of the concept. Through empirical studies, education researchers can trace the influence of economists and economic ideas, track how this influence happens, and by whom. The discipline's influence has likely led to an outsized influence of economists in education policy spaces, as advisors, providers of expert testimony, and dominant presences in news media, which in turn perpetuates economic imperialism. For instance, bibliometric

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analyses might follow the influence of economists in papers that are cited in the media and in policy debates. Analyses can show how, and at what scale, economists have increased their scope to include a broader range of policy areas studied. Furthermore, rather than focusing only on economic ideas that are present in the field of education or in education policy discourse, scholars could attend to how alternative or competing ideas and logics, such as those from sociology, legal studies, anthropology, philosophy, or political science, for example, become marginalized.

Social network analysis can also empirically trace the influence of economists on policy and practice, both in terms of network structure (for instance, centrality) and relationships (such as the nature of ties and connections). This type of work could identify the paths through which economists influence policy, quantitatively tracing the influence within different dissemination outlets, such as social media, news media, and public testimony. For example, further study could help illuminate how and when economists interact with the powerful advocacy networks that drive market-based reforms.

Qualitative analyses conducted using data such as interviews might offer insights into how policymakers and educators actually understand (or misunderstand) economic logic when adopting certain economic assumptions or uncover their views on economists' roles in policy spheres, and how they weigh different sources and forms of evidence.

Conclusion

Despite critiques, economic imperialism has moved beyond the colonization of academic disciplines into public policy circles in a wide array of social sectors. Policies not directly related to "markets," in areas such as the environment, child care, and food provision, are driven largely by economic analyses. Notably, economic imperialism has been able to withstand even major crises such as the Great Recession and the failure to predict such events.

We aim to promote a more widespread use of *economic imperialism* in education scholarship. We argue for the concept's increased uptake given its relevance to so many educational areas, pushing beyond critique to foundational causes of marketization and other popular policy prescriptions; its relevance to ethical issues of justice and equity; its ability to be empirically tested using a range of methodologies; and its promise for application across global contexts.

It is important to note that economics need not be imperialist. It could expand in nonimperialist ways, such as by examining new phenomena or unoccupied territories. Or it could be truly multidisciplinary, embracing and offering complementary analyses to other disciplinary outlooks. Or, if concepts from a broader set of economic traditions were "imperialistic," that is, those drawing from feminist, Marxist, or stratification economics, the application of economic thinking to education may not have such problematic implications for equity and social justice.

Although we trace the application of economic imperialism over the course of decades, the current moment magnifies its significance. Education policymakers preparing for the

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COVID-19 aftermath will likely focus on issues of learning loss, cost-effectiveness, and budgetary shortfalls, particularly since COVID-19 has been framed as an economic problem as much as a public health risk (Livne, 2021), but we urge them to be wary of responses potentially rooted in economic imperialism.

Moreover, our analysis coincides with a global reckoning about racism and anti-Black violence. Economics as a field has been, and continues to be, White dominated (Casselman & Tankersley, 2020). The field has grappled with issues of race in only a very minimal way (Francis & Gifty Opoku-Agyeman, 2020). Researchers have found that policies that rest on neoclassical economic assumptions exacerbate, rather than mitigate, racial inequities and neglect to address structural dimensions of racism (Gamble, 2020). An overreliance on economic thinking can thus perpetuate racist policies and racialized assumptions and can ignore the structural forms of inequity in the economy. We posit that, because economic imperialism captures the dominance of a field that reproduces Whiteness in academia and in policymaking, the concept of economic imperialism may be timely and useful for those seeking to uncover the intersections between economic dominance and racism.

Educational actors should be mindful of economic imperialism when considering solutions to educational problems. Yet we do not reject economic analyses and ideas outright. We propose heterodox economic approaches to education that consider structural inequities in society and the economy to inform policy, alongside other disciplines. When education actors listen to economists, they ought to remain attuned to any assumptions proposed while favoring those economists who present more nuanced and complex conceptualizations of education policies, strategies, and goals.

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Table 1

Field or Discipline of Articles on Economic Imperialism

Field/discipline	Number of sources
Anthropology	2
Economics	31
Education	8
Environment	2
Health/medicine	2
Law	3
Migration studies	1
Philosophy	6
Political science	1
Religion/theology	2
Sociology	4
Total	62 Publications

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Table 2

Education Literature on Economic Imperialism

Author(s)	Year	Education topic	Study context	Education sector	Approach/method
Allais, S.	2012	Outcomes-based policies/qualifications frameworks	Global/comparative	Vocational education	Conceptual/empirical (qualitative)
Allais, S.	2014	Outcomes-based policies/qualifications frameworks	Global/comparative	Vocational education	Conceptual/empirical (qualitative)
Ellison, S., & Aloe, A.	2019	School choice	United States	K–12	Empirical (qualitative)
Ellison, S.	2014	School choice; teacher effectiveness policies; standardized assessments	United States	K–12	Conceptual
Gilead, T.	2015	Schools as organizations; teacher effectiveness policies; curriculum	N/A	K–12	Conceptual
Menashy, F., & Read, R.	2016	School choice	Global/comparative	K–12	Empirical (quantitative)
Stuart, M.	2016	Curriculum	New Zealand	ECE	Empirical (qualitative)
Tan, E.	2014	Human capital development	N/A	N/A (applies to all sectors)	Conceptual

Note. N/A = not applicable; ECE = early childhood education.

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